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'When Stars Attack!' to Look at Exploding Stars' Effect on Earth, Beyond

Sep-11-2009

"When Stars Attack! In Search of Near-Earth Supernova Explosions," a presentation by a University of Illinois faculty member, will continue Eastern Illinois University's yearlong celebration of the International Year of Astronomy.

Brian Fields, associate professor of astronomy and physics at the U of I, is to speak at 7 p.m. Thursday, Sept. 17, in the EIU Physical Science Building's Phipps Lecture Hall. The event is free and open to the public.

In a supernova, a massive star is destroyed in an extremely powerful explosion, leaving behind a black hole. A shock wave carries the star's ashes -- newly created heavy elements -- through space, stirring interstellar gas and, at times, spurring the formation of new stars.

Fields will discuss how recent evidence suggests that radioactive iron atoms found deep in the Earth's ocean are debris from a star exploding near Earth about 3 million years ago.

In addition to giving scientists a clue of what powers supernovae, the findings suggest that the explosion's proximity to Earth might have had major results on the planet, Fields wrote.

"An explosion so close to Earth was probably a 'near-miss,' which emitted intense and possibly harmful radiation," Fields wrote on his Web site. "The resulting environmental damage may even have led to extinction of species which were the most vulnerable to this radiation."

Fields' presentation will be the first event of the fall semester in EIU's yearlong celebration of the International Year of Astronomy. IYA is a worldwide commemoration of many historic astronomical achievements, including the 400th anniversary of Galileo's first look through a telescope and the 40th anniversary of man's first steps on the moon.

EIU's IYA events are sponsored by the EIU College of Sciences and the EIU Department of Physics.